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ABSTRACT

The relevance of homework in today's schools is explored in this bulletin. Following the introduction, chapter 1 examines the effect of homework on academic achievement and concludes that there is a lack of agreement on the benefits of homework and on the amount of time students should spend on it. Chapter 2 describes homework practices in some Oregon schools. In a survey of eight elementary, middle, and high school teachers in several districts, all expressed the belief that homework assignments help student achievement. Innovations in homework assistance implemented by two districts--Duvall County Public Schools in Jacksonville, Florida, and in Mineola, New York--are described in the third chapter. Chapter 4 offers recommendations for establishing an effective policy and for defining the roles of the school board, administrators, teachers, parents, and students. A conclusion is that although controversy continues about the impact of homework on academic achievement, the belief in its effectiveness will remain a trend in educational thinking. A successful policy requires coordination, community awareness, and commitment. Sample homework policies and guidelines are contained in the appendix. (Contains 23 references.) (LMI)

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HOMEWORK

How Effective? How Much to Assign? The Need for Clear Policies

Anne Hill Thomas

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Preface

It's 8 p.m. in the Johnson household. Dinner is over, the dishes are cleared, and the family is settling into its evening activities.

"Tommy, it's time to do your homework," Mom says.

"Aww, Mom, do I have to do it right now? 'The Simpsons' are just coming on. Can't it wait until they're over?" Tommy answers.

"No, you have too much homework to do. Now get busy, young man," Mom says firmly.

Reluctantly Tommy drags himself away from the television set and spreads his books out on the dining room table. He digs in, and for the next hour Tommy wrestles with arithmetic and social studies.

Each weekday evening this homework vignette is played out in thousands of American homes. The scenario changes vastly, however, from house to house. Some children talk Mom into letting them watch "The Simpsons," then they watch something else until it's bedtime, and homework doesn't get done at all. Some children don't even tell Mom they have homework. Some children don't have a Mom to tell—she's out working and Dad left years ago. Some children try to do their homework, but Mom and Dad are arguing and it's hard to concentrate when you're afraid.

Homework is a traditional component of American education, and as critics raise their voices about the inefficiency of today's schools, they look to homework—more homework, better homework—as one part of the solution.

It is assumed that homework helps students to attain greater academic achievement. Is this true? If so, how much homework should be assigned? How can schools, teachers, and parents ensure that students make the most of their homework assignments?

This Bulletin explores the relevance of homework in today's schools. It examines current practice in some Oregon schools and presents the opinions of various educational leaders in the United States.

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Introduction

As with so many things having to do with education, controversy is easy to find. Even the topic of homework has its proponents and opponents.

Early educators regarded the brain as a muscle needing exercise, similar to other muscles in the body. In 1890, William James, in *The Principles of Psychology,* described the mind as "pudding or mortar" that needs to be fashioned by outside forces. He said that exercise such as homework produced paths for the "nervous current" (Harris Cooper 1989).

Around 1910, the *Ladies Home Journal* and *School Review* opposed homework because it was unsupervised and allowed children to practice mistakes. Furthermore, the children had to carry their schoolbooks home, which some suggested was an unhealthy practice (Herbert Walberg and others 1985).

In 1931, F. A. Bogges wrote that homework added to students' store of useful knowledge, and it helped them form good work habits. Another writer of that era endorsed homework with the view that "freedom at night cultivates lazy habits"; some contended that if homework wasn't assigned as early as the fourth grade, it would be difficult to assign it later (Cooper).

In the 1940s, the emphasis in homework shifted from drill to problem solving, and many apparently thought the effort was not worth it. In the 1950 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research,* for example, H. J. Otto wrote that compulsory homework did not provide sufficient results to justify its continuance.

After Sputnik was launched by the Russians in the late 1950s, the American public feared the United States was falling behind its Communist enemies. As a consequence, the philosophy that homework wasn't justified changed, and many educators were convinced that homework could help us catch up.

During the Vietnam War years, homework again fell out of favor, being perceived as putting undue pressure on students. In 1968, P. R. Wildman wrote, "Whenever homework crowds out social experience, out-

door recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children" (Cooper).

The 1980s witnessed yet another renaissance of the belief that homework has value. Since the report *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, pressure has been on schools to do better. American schools don't measure up to those in other countries, critics say; not enough homework is one reason.

Even a cursory look reveals that homework is alive and well in today's classrooms. Whether it accomplishes what administrators, teachers, and parents hope, however, is an issue that is explored in chapter 1.

Chapter I

Does Homework Help Children Academically?

> Homework probably involves the complex interaction of more influences than any other instructional device.
>
> Harris Cooper

What exactly is homework? Harris Cooper defines *homework* as "tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours." But other educators say there is no commonly accepted definition of homework, and indeed, Cooper's definition does not address work that is done either in the classroom or during study periods set aside in many schools.

For example, students who finish their class assignments quickly may dig into a homework assignment either for that class or another one. Some students may complete all their homework at school during study periods. Nevertheless, the concept of homework seems to be that it is work done outside of class, providing an extension of the class period into students' personal time.

A Taxonomy of Homework

In 1979, Jackson Lee and Wayne Pruitt developed the most comprehensive taxonomy of homework tasks to date. The classification they devised follows:

Practice assignments are assigned after skills have been taught in the classroom, thus reinforcing the new skills. Some educators believe this is the most ineffective type of assignment because exercises tend to be dull and mechanical.

Preparation assignments are designed to provide background information to students before a topic is discussed. The most common type of preparation assignment is to read a certain chapter before the next day's class.

Extension assignments take students beyond classwork by asking them to apply knowledge and skills they have learned to new projects (Eugene Jongsma 1985). The principal focus of this type of homework is production rather than reproduction (Michael Palardy 1988).

Creative assignments go a step beyond extension assignments in that they require students to integrate many skills and concepts when producing a major project.

Arguments For and Against Assigning Homework

The argument presented most often in favor of homework is that it provides students with more time for study, which in turn reinforces their learning and leads to greater academic achievement (Palardy).

As we shall see, this conclusion is disputed, but the common perception seems to be that more is better.

Some reasons for assigning homework are:

- Students, parents, and the public expect homework to be assigned. For example, various Gallup polls have revealed that the public supports more homework; students think it is necessary; and more than 95 percent of all teachers favor it (Palardy).
- Homework eases time constraints because it allows classroom time to be spent for other things.
- It teaches students self-discipline, independence, and responsibility—characteristics that have lifelong value. In addition, they learn how to budget their time.
- Homework allows children to explore their own interests and work at their own ability level.
- It teaches children that learning takes place outside as well as inside the school.
- Homework encourages parental involvement with their children and with the school. [A Gallup Poll taken in 1985 showed that 49 percent of parents said they helped their elementary children with their homework. This figure was up from 37 percent in 1977 (Helen Featherstone 1985).]

But homework opponents point to several reasons why it should not be assigned:

- Students get bored if they are assigned repetitive work.

- Homework limits leisure time, which may limit time spent with the family or in community or extracurricular activities.
- Parents may hinder the process in a variety of ways: by doing their children's homework for them; by failing to understand the assignment; or by providing the wrong answers.
- Homework leads to undesirable character traits like cheating or copying.
- The home is often a poor work environment, especially if various tools or materials are required that the family cannot afford or will not buy. In addition, not all families have the ability to provide a quiet place for undisturbed study.
- Inequities between families who are eager to help their children with homework and families who cannot or will not provide help creates even greater disparity among students.

Does Homework Lead to Academic Achievement?

Does homework boost academic achievement? The answer is an unqualified maybe. Numerous studies have been conducted in an attempt to determine the effect of homework on academic achievement. Some studies indicate that homework helps; others suggest it doesn't.

In the eighty years between 1904 and 1984, eighty-six homework experiments were carried out; all but eighteen of them were conducted after 1960. After reviewing these studies, Harvey Foyle and Gerald Bailey (1988) found that while results varied, generally homework was found to either benefit or not harm student achievement. Foyle and Bailey also noted that the research was often poorly conducted and thus offered misleading results.

Foyle and Bailey report that thirty-three elementary experiments, twenty high school experiments, and thirty-three college experiments covered such subjects as mathematics (sixty-three experiments were math-related), social studies, English, shorthand, health, and foreign languages.

Following is a summary of some points they found during their examination:

- A study of approximately 1,000 Alabama students in grades 5-8 reported no statistically significant relationship between the amount of time spent on homework and scholastic achievement.
- A homework vs. no-homework experiment for 20 weeks in grades 5-6 in Troy, New York, concluded that while slower students gained from doing homework, most students found the gain to be negligible and not worth the effort.

- A study of two eighth-grade classes in Oklahoma, in which one class was regularly assigned homework and the other was not, concluded that homework that was properly assigned and evaluated helped scholarship, that brighter no-homework students gained less than brighter students who did homework, and that average and below average students in the no-homework study group were much less successful than those who had homework.

- Foyle himself conducted a homework vs. no-homework experiment for six weeks in tenth-grade American history classes in Kansas. The experiment involved six classes and 1,181 students. Homework consisting of worksheets was handed out at the end of the class period, collected the next day and graded. He found a statistically significant difference in achievement scores that favored the homework classes. He found no difference, however, between preparation and practice homework, suggesting that both types of homework were equally beneficial.

Other reviews of studies about the effect of homework on achievement have yielded these conclusions:

- A. Goldstein decided in 1960, after examining articles published from 1928 through 1958, that studies suggest regularly assigned homework favors higher academic achievement.

- Joe Dan Austin looked at studies performed from 1960 to 1977 and noted that 16 comparisons show significant differences favoring the homework group and 13 show no difference; no comparisons favor the no-homework group. Austin further concludes that homework seems preferable for grades 4 through 10, that homework's effects are cumulative, and that the greatest academic achievement is found in mathematics.

- Cynthia Knorr read those same reviews, added more, and concluded that the studies are inconclusive in proving that homework assists academic achievement.

- Wayne Frederick and Herbert Walberg studied the amount of time spent on homework and its relationship to achievement and decided that "homework time may be as predictive as class time in producing achievement effects." (Joel Turvey 1986)

Data derived from the first wave of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) provide yet another lens through which to view the relationship between homework and academic achievement. In addition to examining these two variables, Timothy Z. Keith and colleagues (1992) also threw into the pot a third ingredient—parent involvement. The NELS data, provided by 21,835 students and their parents, suggest that "general parental involvement has a substantial effect on eight graders' achievement test scores. This effect seems to be accomplished primarily through homework;

students whose parents are more involved complete more homework, and this homework, in turn, increases their achievement" (Keith and others 1992). Interestingly, contrary to what was anticipated, the NELS data also revealed that "TV viewing had no effect on eighth grade achievement" (Keith and others).

Are Grades Too High?

Based on their research, Timothy Keith and Ellis Page suggest that grading standards in American schools are generally lax.

In their review of the High School and Beyond Longitudinal Study, they noticed that even low-ability seniors who do no homework earn, on the whole, above a C average. The overall mean was close to a B average, and only approximately 20 percent of the HSB seniors reported having a C or lower grade average.

They concluded that "high school seniors do relatively little homework while earning relatively high grades."

One of the more inventive, often quoted studies was done by Keith and Ellis Page in (1985). For their analysis they used high school seniors from the first wave of the High School and Beyond Longitudinal Study, conducted under the auspices of the National Center for Education Statistics.

They set up various path models of variables that included race, ability, family background, field of study, and homework to determine how each variable affects student grades and test scores. Through coefficients, the models show the strength of the relationship between variables. For example, family background has a +.226 coefficient effect on the student's field of study, according to their model. (The paths are standardized coefficients where +\- 1.000 represents complete influence.)

They found that ability was the strongest predictor of a student's grades (+.315). The coefficient of homework on grades was +.192. Just as interesting is the fact that the coefficient between field of study and homework is +.268. In other words, the field of study often affects how much homework is done. The relationship between ability and test scores was strong (+.625), but the relationship between homework and test scores was much weaker (+.113).

Keith and Page also found that the more time students spend on homework, the better they perform. For example, students with high learning ability who did no homework earned mostly B grades, while those who had ten hours of homework per week earned grades of A and B. Students with low learning ability who spent ten hours per week on homework received mostly B grades, while those who did no homework performed in the B and C range.

The Opposition Speaks

One antihomework educator is Bill Barber of Learning Research Laboratories in San Luis Obispo, California. In 1986, Barber took exception to Walberg's claim that research "shows much higher achievement when homework is required—especially if it is graded or commented on."

Barber fired back, "A close examination of the research that Walberg reviews does not support homework as a means of improving student achievement. In fact, the majority of the studies cited in the article have nothing to do with whether the assignment of homework does or does not affect student achievement." He continues:

> Perhaps we need to treat homework as just what it is: peripheral to the problems that have plagued our nation's schools for the past decades. To include "more homework" on an agenda for educational reform is embarrassing; it implies that we are nothing but amateurs if the best we can muster up for students who are failing in school, students who are dropping out at alarming rates, students who can't read or write, is a recommendation that they ought to get more of the same thing.

Instead, Barber calls for creative learning environments that allow students to advance through school at their own rate; more time for serious study in school before sending work home; more freedom for students and greater access to resources throughout their schools and communities; and new technologies that compete with chalkboard learning and expository teaching.

Barber concludes, "as long as we keep ignoring the realities of what it is that needs to be changed and keep tinkering around with such meaningless things as 'more homework,' we will continue to be 'a nation at risk'."

Surveys Yield Mixed Results

In 1986, Cheryl Bentz-Hill and others (1988) from Indiana University formed a team that conducted a study of 3,730 third- and sixth-grade students. The researhers sent surveys to parents questioning them about their children's homework practices and then compared these surveys with the children's school data. The results are mixed.

Bentz-Hill and her colleagues found a correlation of +.39 between homework and test scores/grades for third graders and of +.45 for sixth graders. For third graders, results indicate that less homework is associated with higher academic performance and more homework is associated with lower academic performance. The researchers theorize that perhaps students are doing homework incorrectly, and students' misunderstanding is subsequently reflected in test scores.

In the case of sixth-grade students, they report the relationship be-

tween homework and academic performance was weak. The strongest relationship was found between cognitive ability and academic achievement.

The team's findings led to the conclusion that the amount of time (number of days and hours) spent on homework does not contribute significantly to a child's test scores or grades.

But Bentz-Hill and her colleagues add a note of caution concerning their findings. They point out that parents, who had filled out the surveys, may have incorrectly estimated the amount of time their children spent on homework. In addition, homework associated with specific subject areas was not investigated.

They further point to studies that suggest homework may be more effective as a child grows older and coursework becomes more specific and rigorous.

Despite the Indiana study and Barber's opposing viewpoint, other findings seem to lend credence to the perception that homework is valuable:

- Homework benefits achievement and attitudes, especially if it is commented upon or graded. Plain old homework can raise a student's achievement from the 50th percentile to the 60th percentile; with feedback, that same student can reach the 79th percentile (Herbert Walberg and others 1985).
- Individualized enrichment homework reaps greater achievement. Such homework especially affects reading skills in a positive manner (Foyle and Bailey 1988).
- Homework is more successful if the process is planned, homework is checked, and students receive guidance in study procedures (Foyle and Bailey 1988).
- There is a suggestion that students from low-income families who persevere intensively at homework can excel academically over those who come from high-income families (Walberg and others 1985).

How Much Homework Is Enough?

Once consensus is reached that homework has a favorable effect on academic achievement, the next question is: How much homework should be assigned? Again, the answers vary. The amount of homework assigned is one area where U.S. schools are judged to be weak compared to schools in other countries such as Japan.

Herbert Walberg (1991), for example, points out that if typical American students add four hours of homework per week to thirty hours of schoolwork (about six hours total schoolwork and homework per day, five days a week), they have added 13 percent to their learning time.

Typically, Japanese students attend school for approximately thirty-six hours per week (including Saturdays) and do about sixteen hours of homework per week, extending their learning time by 44 percent. That means that the total average learning time in Japan of fifty-two hours per week is 53 percent higher than the average of thirty-four hours per week spent by U.S. students.

> If afterschool tutoring, more extensive study time for special examinations, and a longer school year in Japan are considered, then Japanese students may spend twice the annual study time of American students. This means the Japanese high school diploma may be equivalent to the American baccalaureate degree. (Walberg)

The discrepancy in amount of time spent doesn't mean that American students are necessarily lazy, Walberg notes. He describes a student in an upper-socioeconomic-class school who, as a sophomore, was required to write about ten papers that year, none of them more than two pages. As a junior, he wrote about the same number of papers plus a twelve-page junior essay for a total of thirty-two pages for the year. Then the student joined the debate team, composing and editing an average of 450 pages of briefs per year, leading Walberg to believe that U.S. students are capable of doing much more than what is expected of them.

Walberg does not accept the excuse that students don't have time for more homework. When he surveyed the 1981 High School and Beyond Study, he found that students averaged four to five hours of homework per week compared to twenty-eight hours watching television (Walberg and others 1985). Other student activities were working to earn money for clothes, dating, and cars. "In

How Much Time Should My Child Spend on Homework?

According to some researchers, there are two ways to increase students' opportunities to learn: (1) increase the amount of time that students have to learn, and (2) expand the amount of content they receive. Homework assignments may foster both these goals. Reforms in education have called for increased homework, and, as a result, reports show that students are completing considerably more homework than they did a decade ago.

According to statements by the National Parent-Teachers Association (PTA) and the National Education Association, the following amounts of homework are recommended:

- From kindergarten to third grade, no more than twenty minutes per day.
- From fourth to sixth grade, twenty to forty minute per day.
- From seventh to twelfth grade, the recommended amount of time varies according to the type and number of subjects a student is taking. In general, college-bound students receive lengthier and more involved homework than students preparing to enter the work force immediately after graduation.

Source: Beverly Swanson, ACCESS ERIC

the long term, (students) would learn and earn more by investing their time in homework to increase their knowledge and skills," he says.

Walberg also surveyed eighth-grade students in eleven countries. He reports that the countries whose students average the most homework (eight to nine hours per week) also have the highest average test scores. Swedish and American students do the least homework (an average of four to five hours a week) and have the lowest scores. (Walberg also criticizes America's short school calendar. He points out that among twenty-seven countries he surveyed, only two have shorter school years than the 180-day year found in the United States. Japanese students attend school 243 days a year and German students about 230 days.)

How much time does Walberg recommend for homework? While he admits it is difficult to state exact time requirements, he suggests that elementary school students study two to three hours a night, junior high students from three to four hours, and high school students four to five hours (Walberg 1991).

The amount of time spent on homework is apparently increasing. Joseph Murphy and Karen Decker (1990) surveyed 100 Illinois high schools and found the average teacher distributed about two hours of homework per class per week or about 30 minutes of work four times per week. If students take five classes, this means they are doing about two hours of homework per night.

Unfortunately, they point out, homework demands are inequitable. They found that 98 percent of teachers who taught college preparatory or advanced placement courses assigned homework. In contrast, only 77 percent of the students in vocational classes, 79 percent in special education classes, and 83 percent in general track classes received homework assignments.

> When we combine this information with findings from other studies, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that students in nonacademic track classes do considerably less homework than their academic track peers. Consequently, students who receive fewer homework assignments may be disadvantaged by the educational process. (Murphy and Decker)

Does More Time Mean More Learning?

Not surprisingly, educators also disagree on this subject. While Walberg emphatically states that "world-class learning will require more study time," a team that surveyed Indiana students found that as total homework time increased, students' grades remained the same. In some cases grades decreased as homework increased, leading one to wonder if too much homework is counterproductive (Cheryl Bents-Hill and others 1988).

Based on his research, Harris Cooper (1989) concludes that forty-three correlations indicate students who do more homework have better achievement scores, while only seven correlations indicate the opposite.

He found that time spent on homework is most beneficial for high school students (r= +.25), somewhat beneficial for students in grades 5-9 (r= +.07), and negligible for students in grades 3-5, where the correlation was nearly zero. He suggests that junior high students do best with no more than one to two hours of homework a night, while high school students can handle more.

Cooper comments that homework probably works best when the material is not complex or terribly novel. He cites evidence that a distribution of material across several assignments is more beneficial than having homework assignments concentrate only on material covered in class that day.

Contrasting Conclusions

It is obvious that the amount of time each student spends on homework depends considerably on that student. Slower students will find their homework to be time-consuming, while quicker students will breeze through theirs and have time left over (perhaps to watch television).

Individualized homework assignments may overcome this inequity somewhat, but teachers often don't have time to design a separate assignment for each student. If blanket assignments are made, one assumes teachers should keep these individual characteristics in mind.

As with the rest of the homework vs. no-homework question, there is disagreement on how much time should be spent on it. Bents-Hill and others (1988), who surveyed 3,730 Indiana parents about the amount of time their children spent on homework, conclude (with several qualifications): "The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that the amount of homework (number of days and number of hours) does not contribute significantly to a child's achievement test scores, competency test scores, or teacher-assigned grades." They state:

> Taking homework and school time more seriously calls for big changes in American education. Of course, students' abilities, good teaching, and parental encouragement also make a difference. These may sustain present mediocrity, but world-class learning will require more study time.

More Research Is Needed

Whatever educators believe about the benefits of homework, they agree that more research is needed.

Cooper (1989), for example, read more than 100 research reports and found them disappointing. He says,

> First, many of the studies used poor research designs. The homework question would benefit greatly from some well conducted, large scale studies. Second, given the richness of thinking and debate on homework, exemplified by the list of its suggested positive and negative effects and the process model, research has been narrowly focused on achievement as an outcome. Only a few studies looked at homework's effect on attitudes toward school and subject matter (with generally negligible results). No studies looked at nonacademic outcomes like study habits, cheating, or participation in community activities.

Foyle and Bailey (1988) agree. They identify three needs that future research should investigate:

- Researchers need to determine the relationship between homework assignments and the measure of student achievement. They questioned, however, whether standardized tests were the correct vehicles to measure this relationship.
- Researchers need to examine specific types of homework in well-designed experiments.
- Researchers need to determine a systematic homework approach that leads to student achievement.

Even though opinions differ, the idea that homework is beneficial is apparently well entrenched in the minds of many, indicating that the practice will continue. The next chapter examines homework practices in some Oregon schools.

Chapter 2

Homework Practices in Oregon Schools

To examine current practices and policies concerning homework, teachers in several Oregon school districts were asked to participate in a survey. Each district was asked to have a teacher at the elementary, middle school/junior high, and high school level respond to a one-page questionnaire. While the scope of the survey is too small to indicate any trends, it provides a glimpse at what is happening in some classrooms.

What Some Oregon Teachers Think about Homework

All teachers who completed the questionnaire report that they think their homework assignments help student achievement. More specific comments follow.

Elementary Schools

A fourth-grade teacher in the Crow-Applegate-Lorane School District says his practice homework "always" helps "if it is completed." This teacher says that 17 percent of his students "never" do their homework correctly; 26 percent do it correctly "sometimes"; 35 percent "usually" complete it correctly; and 22 percent "always" get it right. He assigns letter grades to homework.

A second-grade teacher from the Bend School District who assigns practice homework says that 95 percent of homework assigned "always"

helps achievement and 5 percent "usually" helps. This teacher says that 95 percent of the students "always" complete their homework, and 90 percent "always" do it correctly. The remaining 5 percent and 10 percent "usually" complete it and do it correctly. Homework does not receive letter grades.

Intermediate/Junior High Schools

A seventh-grade social studies and reading teacher from the Beaverton School District reports that most students "always" find homework beneficial "or I would not assign it!" This teacher, who assigns practice, preparation, and extension homework, says 2 percent "never" complete their homework; 8 percent "sometimes" do; 80 percent "usually" do; and 10 percent "always" do. The homework is not always a right-or-wrong kind of assignment, and most students do it correctly. Grades are sometimes given, depending upon the type of assignment. This teacher always checks completion.

This particular teacher points out that homework should not be "busy work." She continues, "It should be practice or an extension of work in progress. It should be possible to complete, and, if assigned, it should be necessary as part of the next day's classwork."

She adds, "Homes are the most inequitable situations kids have. Projects where supplies are required assume parents who can/will purchase supplies. Some kids have parents who help or even take over homework for kids. Some kids haven't got a space or any time or support from their families. Therefore, it's essential that homework be possible for the *kids* to do and to do on their own, since to assume any back-up support really is unfair to many children."

This teacher also has an extracredit program that allows students to follow their own interests beyond the classroom curriculum. The program involves "all kinds of creative possibilities, watching movies, going to libraries, independent field trips, etc., that are not required, but enhancements."

An English teacher who teaches grades 7-8 in the Medford School District believes 95 percent of the homework assigned helps students' academic achievement "if they do it!"

This teacher, who assigns both practice and extension homework, said 75 percent "usually" complete their homework; 20 percent "always" do; and five percent "sometimes" do. She said 30 percent "always" do their homework correctly, compared to 50 percent who "usually" do and 20 percent who "sometimes" do. She assigns letter grades.

High Schools

A teacher from Taft High School in Lincoln County, who teaches mathematics (algebra II through calculus) in grades 10 through 12, estimates that 90 percent of her students "always" benefit from homework, while the remaining 10 percent "usually" do.

This teacher assigns practice, preparation, and extension homework but does not assign letter grades to it. She estimates that 15 percent "sometimes" complete their homework; 65 percent "usually" do; and 20 percent "always" do. The same percentages apply to whether they did homework correctly.

A social studies teacher from North Bend High School who teaches grades 9-12 says he believes his homework assignments usually help student achievement. He assigns both preparation and extension homework but does not give letter grades.

A mathematics teacher at South Albany High School assigns practice and preparation homework to her students in grades 9-12. She believes that 69 percent of her students "usually" benefit from homework, while 30 percent "sometimes" do and one percent "always" does. She does not assign letter grades.

This same teacher lists these percentages for students completing their homework: 5 percent "never"; 15 percent "sometimes"; 60 percent "usually"; and 25 percent "always." Percentages of students who do homework correctly are 30 percent "sometimes"; 60 percent "usually"; and 10 percent "always."

The final response comes from a teacher at La Grande High School, who teaches algebra II, German 2, computer application, and intermediate algebra to grades 9-12. He assigns practice, preparation, and extension homework. Grades are not given "but students can calculate their own."

He estimates that 80 percent of the students in his algebra II class "usually" benefit from homework while 20 percent "sometimes" do. The same percentages hold true for students who do their homework correctly. He cites the following percentages of homework completion: 60 percent "always" do it, 20 percent "usually," 15-20 percent "sometimes," and as much as 5 percent "never."

Assignments Vary in Oregon Schools

All the eight teachers responding to our homework questionnaire say they assign homework, and five say they assign it nearly every day. Two others say they assign homework every other day, and one teacher assigns it weekly.

The amount of time it takes students to complete their homework varies considerably. An elementary teacher from the Crow-Applegate-Lorane School District estimates his fourth-grade students have an hour of homework each night. This teacher said:

> The homework I assign is really the daily classroom work that isn't completed during class time. I try to keep the time spent at home working on assignments to less than one hour. If, at the end of the day, the homework looks heavier than one hour, I'll hold off on a subject and give class time the following day to complete it. Of course, every class has a few students who can make an hour out of ten minutes worth of homework.

A second-grade teacher from the Bend School District assigns homework Mondays through Thursdays, and she estimates it takes students an average of fifteen minutes to complete it. The school has a guideline limiting homework to a maximum of thirty minutes per night for grades 1-5.

A teacher of seventh-grade social studies and reading from Beaverton assigns thirty minutes worth of homework once a week "more or less," while a seventh- and eighth-grade English teacher from Medford who assigns homework every other day estimates it takes students thirty minutes to complete it.

Not surprisingly, high school students put in more time on homework than younger students do. A mathematics teacher from Taft High School estimates it takes students an average of forty-five minutes to complete their nightly homework, while a social studies teacher at North Bend High School estimates his students put in thirty minutes every other night.

Another mathematics teacher at South Albany High School estimates her students spend thirty minutes on homework almost every day. The amount of time spent "depends a lot on the subject," she says.

Finally, an algebra II teacher at La Grande High School says the time his students spend on their daily homework "varies from five minutes to an hour. The average time? Who knows—it varies by student." He points out that how students spend their time in class often determines how much time they spend on homework: "Does homework include guided practice in class? Some students complete it in class, hence, no homework. Some students don't do much in class, hence, always homework."

Chapter 3

Innovations in Homework Assistance

When they do homework, students are usually on their own. This autonomy can be detrimental if they don't fully understand the subject matter. Oh sure, they can ask Mom or Dad, but sometimes parents just aren't much help. Or worse, in their attempt to help, parents may inadvertently give children inaccurate information.

Perhaps students can get help from older siblings, but they cannot always be depended upon. Fellow students may offer help over the telephone, but sometimes their understanding is lacking as well.

To help students overcome these difficulties, several of the nation's school districts have come up with innovative ways to address the problem. Two districts' efforts are reported below.

Duval County Schools

Duvall County Public Schools in Jacksonville, Florida, makes available to its students three avenues of assistance—a homework hotline, afterhours teacher volunteers, and a nightly call-in television program, states Herb Sang (1986), the district's superintendent.

Homework Hotline

Students in Duval County schools have a number they can call to get assistance with their homework. The school district established a "Homework Hotline" in 1981 in conjunction with the University of North Florida. Every Monday through Thursday, from 5 to 8 p.m., teams of four to six elementary and secondary school teachers staff a bank of five telephones.

With them are all the textbooks used in Duval County schools along with additional resource materials.

If all five telephone lines are busy, a recorded message asks callers for their names, the subject area of their questions, and their telephone numbers so their calls can be returned. The hotline is staffed by volunteers who are working to earn college credit. Volunteers can earn three hours' credit at the University of North Florida, which provides inservice training and program supervision. Another incentive for volunteers is that the school district pays their tuition for other education-related courses.

Sang says the program gained the services of forty teachers each semester for the cost of less than two full-time teacher salaries. In the first five years, the hotline received more than 55,000 telephone calls. Of that number, 60 percent of the calls were about mathematics, 23 percent were about English, and 10 percent of the calls came from parents.

Teacher Volunteers

Another program instituted in Duval County operates after school when teacher volunteers in approximately half of the county's 136 schools are available two hours on two different days of the week in school libraries to answer questions. The most popular schedule is 4 to 6 p.m. for elementary students and 6 to 8 p.m. for secondary students.

Students and their parents are encouraged to go to any participating school during those hours. The program attracted approximately 4,000 students and parents in its first eleven days, and Sang said participation continues to increase.

The Television Connection

Noting that the average student will watch more than 18,000 hours of television before graduating from high school, the Duval County system decided to use TV in its multipronged effort to assist students with homework. The district negotiated a cooperative use agreement with its local public broadcasting station to produce its own show airing at 5 p.m. each weekday. Tuesday's program, for example, is "Hotline Math," consisting primarily of teachers answering questions from viewers. Wednesday's program is "Success Express," offering homework assistance to junior high students in remedial mathematics and language arts classes. "Hotline Science" is offered on Thursdays.

During each show teachers staff a telephone bank that records callers' names, telephone numbers, schools, and questions. Students are called back to talk on-air. An average of 163 calls are logged during each show but only

How Can Parents Get Involved?

- Share any concerns you may have about the amount or type of homework assigned with your child's teacher or principal.
- Encourage your child to take notes concerning homework assignments in case questions arise later at home.
- Provide a suitable study area and the necessary tools (for example, paper, pencils, and reference books) for your child to complete homework assignments.
- Limit afterschool activities to allow time for both homework and family activities.
- Monitor television viewing and establish a specific homework time.
- Plan a homework schedule with your child. Allow for free time when assignments are completed.
- Praise your child's efforts. If questions arise about the assignments, and your child asks for help, ask him or her questions or work through an example rather than simply providing the answer.

Source: Beverly Swanson, ACCESS ERIC

twenty are dealt with on the air. More than 22,000 people called in during the program's first four years.

Duval County's innovative homework assistance plan provides students easy access to help; consequently, "students have no one to blame but themselves for not completing a homework assignment," says Sang.

Parent Education in New York

In an effort to enlighten parents about the value of homework, a middle school in Mineola, New York, started parent education sessions to help parents understand their part in helping students study and complete assignments.

Probably the most important concept to get across to parents is that homework is important. "It's essential that you convince parents that supporting homework is a valuable contribution to their children's education," says Fern Moskowitz (1988), administrative assistant at Mineola Middle School. She recommends teaching parents how to help students without doing their work for them, how to provide a proper study area, and how to build close relationships with teachers.

Students Need to Learn Study Skills

Equally important in making homework a positive rather than a negative experience is teaching students study skills. They should learn how to take notes, conduct research, and write book reports. They should also be taught how to follow directions and outline a story, textbook, or chapter.

Homework organizers, such as looseleaf binders, are helpful for the student who lacks organizational skills. Students note their assignments, upcoming tests, or long-term projects in their organizer and check them off as they are completed. Such a device allows parents an opportunity to keep track of their children's progress and homework assignments (Moskowitz 1988).

Chapter 4

Establishing an Effective Policy

If school boards, administrators, teachers, and parents all think homework is important, individual districts need to consider several related issues, including setting a homework policy.

Surprisingly, many schools and districts do not have a homework policy. Only one of the teachers who responded to our questionnaire said her school district had a districtwide policy. Two teachers said their schools had homework guidelines. The guidelines for one of the schools (see Appendix) are included in the teachers' manual; the other teacher said her district has a guideline that homework be limited to thirty minutes per night in grades 1-5. The remaining districts apparently have no policy, though the teachers who responded from those districts all assign homework.

On a statewide basis, the Oregon Department of Education has not adopted a homework policy; each district is free to devise its own. The Oregon School Boards Association has a model policy (see Appendix), and it recommends that districts adopt such policies.

Homework Policies Are Rare Nationwide

The no-policy phenomenon can be found throughout the country. In their survey of Illinois high schools, Joseph Murphy and Karen Decker (1990) found that only 30 percent of the districts, 24 percent of the schools, and 18 percent of the departments surveyed had homework policies.

"In general, decisions about homework were made solely by the teachers," they said. Furthermore, 62 percent of the teachers reported they have no formal structures to assist them in their homework procedures.

In another survey, 62 percent of the chief school administrators in Pennsylvania said they had no written policy (Joel Turvey 1986).

The lack of such a policy means that individual teachers decide how much homework to assign, when to assign it, what kind of homework to assign, and how to deal with it once it is turned in. Furthermore, without a clear policy in mind, teachers may have differing expectations, and students are caught trying to decipher exactly what each teacher wants. A lack of coordination can lead to frustration for teachers and students.

For example, of the teachers who responded to our survey, only one reported that she coordinates homework assignments with other teachers and that was because she is a team teacher. The other respondents said they do not coordinate assignments with other teachers. (Two of these respondents teach in self-contained classrooms in elementary schools.) This means that a social studies teacher might assign an hour's worth of homework the same night that the math, English, and history teachers assign the same amount. The following night might be homework-free.

My Kingdom for a Policy

It seems clear that if teachers are going to assign homework, some sort of policy should be in place at both the school and district levels.

Harris Cooper, after reviewing more than 100 conceptual articles and policy statements, found many recommendations to be contradictory. Consequently, he decided to develop a homework policy for Generic School District USA and came up with these recommendations (see Appendix for his homework policy):

- Coordinated policies should exist at the district, school, and classroom levels.
- Districts need to clearly state a broad rationale for why homework is given, why it is sometimes mandatory, and what the general time requirements ought to be.
- Schools should further specify time requirements, coordinate assignments between classes, and set out the role of teachers and principals.
- Teachers should adopt classroom policies that outline what is expected of students and why.

Harvey Foyle (1986) suggests these steps in formulating a policy:

- Form a homework committee that includes parents, students, administrators, and teachers. The committee should be large enough to allow subcommittees but small enough to encourage discussion.
- Conduct a homework survey. Administrators and committee

members should conduct a local survey to determine the opinions teachers, parents, and students have about homework. Survey questions should deal with frequency, length, types, and grading of assignments.

Helen Featherstone (1985) suggests these questions should be addressed:

- What do we want homework to accomplish?
- Which of our homework policies are most successful?
- Do current homework practices frustrate any of the district's goals, and, if so, how?
- How can teachers with limited time and resources accommodate a wide range of students?

Recommendations suggested by Michael Palardy (1988) are as follows:

- Ensure that students and parents understand homework policies.
- Do not assign homework at the primary level.
- Vary the types of homework assignments.
- Individualize homework assignments as much as possible.
- Demonstrate how to do the assignments.
- Coordinate assignments with other teachers.
- Grade and return assignments.

It also stands to reason that each district should study its current homework practices to see who is assigning homework, what type of homework is assigned, how often it is assigned, whether it is graded, and, most of all, whether it appears to be successful.

Where Can Parents Find Out More about Homework Guidelines?

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
College of Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801-4987
(217) 333-1386

National Education Association
1201 16th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 822-7214

The National PTA
700 North Rush Street
Chicago, Illinois 60611-2571
(312) 787-0977

Source: Beverly Swanson, ACCESS ERIC

Each Level Has a Role

If a homework policy is to be effective, each level of the educational system—school board, district administrators, principals, teachers, parents, students—must pull together.

The Role of the School Board

The district must first decide if homework is a desirable extension of the classroom, and if the board decides it is, board members must outline the general purposes it hopes to accomplish. Homework should never be given as punishment!

The board should also decide whether homework is to be required at all levels, and, if so, present a general idea of how much is preferable. The board should understand the capabilities of students at each level, and it should direct administrators to develop a policy that coordinates assignments throughout the curriculum. The board should ensure that all those involved with homework understand the policy.

The Role of Administrators and Principals

Once the school board has devised its policy, it is up to district administrators and principals to implement it. Both groups should work together to ensure that homework guidelines be instituted at each educational level and address such issues as:

- How often homework should be assigned.
- What type of homework should be assigned.
- How homework should be evaluated.
- How students can be helped to successfully complete their homework. [Perhaps a K-12 study skills program should be integrated into the existing curriculum (Fern Moskowitz 1988).]

Once the policy has been addressed districtwide, it is then up to principals to apply it to their individual schools. Principals should lead their staffs through planning, implementing, and maintaining homework support systems (Murphy and Decker).

Principals should also develop guidelines to ensure that homework is taken seriously and monitor activities to ensure the policy is being implemented as desired (Joseph Murphy 1990).

Principals should note that the quality of homework is important. Assignments that are too easy, too hard, or unclear are a waste of time (Herbert Walberg 1991).

Principals should also be aware that responses to homework assignments can be improved. In their survey, Murphy and Decker found that although most assignments were independent-practice assignments, only 39 percent of students achieved a level of 80 percent accuracy, and only 6 percent achieved a level of 90 percent or better.

An important part of homework assignments is evaluating them, and teachers often find they don't have much time to spend correcting them. One suggestion is to use part-time aides, including students. Japanese schools, for example, assign students to small work groups that help each other in planning, correcting, and marking papers. Students also learn cooperation through this process (Walberg).

Evaluation of writing assignments may be particularly time-consuming. A high school English teacher who faces 150 students each day may find it difficult to read and grade major papers, especially if that teacher wants to provide feedback. If a teacher spends ten minutes with each paper, that adds up to twenty-five hours of grading time. Principals should be aware of these constraints and do their best to alleviate them.

Principals may find that each department needs a separate homework policy because of its course content. At Green Mountain Union High School in Chester, Vermont, for example, separate policy statements were devised for home economics, business, art, music, science, and English. The home economics policy, for example, includes worksheets to acquaint students with various aspects of food, collection of recipes, and outside study about foreign foods (Joseph Bonfiglio 1988).

The Role of Teachers

The ultimate responsibility for homework assignment and evaluation falls upon teachers. It is important that they understand their role.

Bonfiglio suggests the teacher's role is to evaluate homework promptly, use it purposefully, be clear about requirements and assignments, tell students how they will be evaluated, and use a variety of evaluation methods.

Teachers should consider various types of assignments instead of always giving the same kind of homework. For example, personalizing assignments can be beneficial, but again, the question of time enters in. Optional assignments that allow students to choose from a list of activities are another possibility.

Elementary teachers should be especially alert to the fact that enormous individual differences are present in their classrooms, including the reality that some children do not have the stamina or a home atmosphere that encourages extensive homework (Featherstone).

Finally, teachers should question whether their assignments are challenging to their students. Murphy and Decker found that in Illinois high schools, 55 percent of the assignments given were to reinforce class material, 23 percent were assigned to master course objectives, and 25 percent of homework assignments were worksheets.

Such a finding has two interpretations, they said. One interpretation is that the patterns reflected teachers' efforts to provide concentrated doses of independent practice. This interpretation is consistent with learning theory and research.

On the other hand, the patterns may "reflect a lack of attention to higher order thinking skills on the part of these teachers" (Murphy and Decker).

The Role of Parents

For homework to be completely effective, parents must play an important role. It is possible that those students who are motivated to succeed at any cost will find a way to do their homework. But such students are uncommon; most need prodding from their parents, such as the boy who wanted to postpone his homework until "The Simpsons" was over.

Parents must also provide a well-lit, quiet place for students to work, whatever materials are needed, and a schedule that takes homework into account.

For example, if students spend only 13 percent of their waking hours in school during the first eighteen years of their lives, that means that parents control the remaining 87 percent (Herbert Walberg and others 1985). However, parents find their control slipping due to the intrusion of television and other activities. In many cases, neither parent is at home, and students are left alone to wrestle with homework.

Why Should Parents Be Concerned about a School Policy?

- Lack of an established homework policy may place either insufficient or unrealistic demands on your child. Students may not be expected to work to capacity; conversely, they may receive too many assignments from different teachers on the same evening.
- Schools with homework policies tend to set guidelines for teachers to systematically correct, grade, and return homework to their students, thus reinforcing learning.
- Schools with homework policies generally provide specific guidelines about what is expected from parents.
- Schools with homework policies tend to carefully design and provide homework assignments appropriate to each grade level.

Source: Beverly Swanson, ACCESS ERIC

Still, parents can accomplish much if they work together with the schools and teachers. One example is the parent education sessions in Mineola, New York, mentioned earlier. Such sessions are held annually to reinforce parental understanding and support (Moskowitz).

Another way parents can help is to provide feedback to teachers about their children's reaction to homework assignments. Teachers need to hear which assignments generate excitement, or at least satisfaction, and which assignments bore, frustrate, or exhaust students (Featherstone).

The Role of Students

The final and most important factor in the homework equation is the student. Simply put, the role of students is to do their homework and learn from it. However, students must be shown the value of homework. Through homework, students can experience success in a nontesting situation and build confidence through achievement, develop self-discipline and time-management skills, learn both individual and group approaches to production, and select their own learning environment and rate (Bonfiglio). Homework should challenge students and help them better understand the subject matter.

All of this is often easier said than done because the effect of homework on a student's academic achievement also depends on the commitment of administrators, teachers, and parents toward supporting a homework policy. Without a coordinated effort at all these levels, homework may be a waste of time.

Conclusion

Although there is controversy about whether homework improves achievement, many school leaders, teachers, and parents firmly believe it does, and it appears this trend in thinking will continue, at least in the near future.

However, it has been shown that homework is too often haphazardly assigned with little coordination throughout the district, the school, or even the department. If a school or district is to implement a successful program, it has considerable work to do—work that involves everyone associated with the school system.

Once a policy has been drawn up and implemented by the school district, the community should be made aware of it. Employers of teenage students should realize their employees have academic obligations, as should coaches and leaders of other extracurricular activities.

If, indeed, homework is a vital ingredient in renewing our faltering educational system, a major commitment is required in designing and implementing homework policies. Otherwise, students, parents, and teachers will remain frustrated and valuable time and resources will be wasted.

Appendix

Sample Homework Policies and Guidelines

Oregon School Boards Association

Version 1

The term "homework" refers to an assignment to be prepared outside of class or during a period of supervised study in class. The purposes of homework are to improve the learning processes, to aid in the mastery of skills, and to create and to stimulate interest on the part of the student.

Homework is a learning activity that should increase in complexity with the student's maturity. Teachers should make meaningful assignments, the purposes of which should be clearly understood by both the teacher and the student.

The information for any homework assignment should be clear and specific so that the student can complete the assignment. Homework should not require the use of reference materials not readily available in most homes, school libraries, or the public library. Homework should require the use of those materials only after the student has had instruction in their use.

Version 2

Homework refers to an assignment to be prepared during a period of supervised study in class or outside of class or that requires individual work in the home.

Homework is to improve the learning process, to aid in the mastery of skills, and to stimulate interest on the part of the student.

Teachers at all grade levels are encouraged to consistently assign homework that will increase in complexity with the maturity of the student.

Homework assignments should take into consideration the individual student's differences, interests, and abilities, as well as the educational resources available at school and at home, and the other learning activities present in the life of each student (such as participation in school activities, family living, religious and cultural interests, and exploration of personal interests).

The purpose of assignments must be clear to each student and any information necessary to understand and complete assignments should be provided.

Homework will be assigned to:

1. complete work assigned to supplement a well planned lesson
2. make up assignments missed because of an excused absence
3. gain extra credit or honors
4. complete research projects or long-range assignments

Homework is not to be used as a form of punishment under any circumstance.

All homework and student scholastic response will be graded on the basis of a) effort (self-competition only), b) academic content.

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Homework Guidelines at Hedrick Junior High School, Medford, Oregon

Hedrick teachers believe that homework is important to learning. These guidelines describe appropriate homework assignments and grading procedures.

1. Homework assignments should supplement work done in class.
2. Homework assignments should be meaningful.
3. Assignments should be of reasonable length; the average student in class should be able to complete the work in 15 to 30 minutes.
4. Teachers should explain methods and procedures and check to see that students clearly understand the homework assigned.
5. Homework grades drop one grade each day they are late unless the late work is caused by an excused absence. (Athletics and activities are not acceptable reasons for late homework.)
6. Students with excused absences may complete homework without penalty. They have the number of days absent plus one more day to complete the work.

Reprinted by permission of Marjorie Laninger, Assistant Principal, Hedrick Junior High School

A Recommended Homework Policy from Harris Cooper

For Districts

Homework is a cost-effective instructional technique. It can have positive effects on achievement and character development and can serve as a vital link between the school and family.

Homework should have different purposes at different grades. For younger students, it should foster positive attitudes, habits, and character traits. For older students, it should facilitate knowledge acquisition in specific topics.

Homework should be required at all grade levels, but a mixture of mandatory and voluntary homework is most beneficial.

The frequency and duration of mandatory assignments should be:

1. Grades 1 to 3—one to three assignments a week, each lasting no more than 15 minutes.
2. Grades 4 to 6—two to four assignments a week, each lasting 15 to 45 minutes.
3. Grades 7 to 9—three to five assignments a week, each lasting 45 to 75 minutes.
4. Grades 10 to 12—four to five assignments a week, each lasting 75 to 120 minutes.

For Schools

The frequency and duration of homework assignments should be further specified to reflect local school and community circumstances.

In schools where different subjects are taught by different teachers, teachers should know:

1. What days of the week are available to them for assignments
2. How much daily homework time should be spent on their subject

Administrators should:

1. Communicate the district and school homework policies to parents
2. Monitor the implementation of the policy
3. Coordinate the scheduling of homework among different subjects if needed

Teachers should clearly state:

1. How the assignment is related to the topic under study
2. The purpose of the assignment
3. How the assignment might best be carried out

4. What the student needs to do to demonstrate that the assignment has been completed

For Teachers

- All students in a class will be responsible for the same assignments, with rare exceptions.
- Homework will include mandatory assignments. Failure to turn in mandatory assignments will necessitate remedial activities.
- Homework will also include voluntary assignments meant to meet the needs of individual students or groups of students.
- All homework assignments will NOT be formally evaluated. They will be used to locate problems in student progress and to individualize instruction.
- Topics will appear in assignments before and after they are covered in class, not just on the day they are discussed.
- Homework will not be used to teach complex skills. It will generally focus on simple skills and material or on the integration of skills already possessed by the student.
- Parents will rarely be asked to play a formal instructional role in homework. Instead, they should be asked to create a home environment that facilitates student self-study.

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